

Fortinbras's Poland

1. The Fortinbras Scenes

In the international backdrop of events to the plot of *Hamlet* a war is being waged against Poland. In Act II Scene ii ambassadors return from Norway to Claudius' court, asking for permission for Fortinbras, nephew to the King of Norway, to cross Danish territory with his troops, on a military campaign against Poland:

Most fair return of greetings and desires.
Upon our first, he sent out to suppress
His nephew's levies; which to him appear'd
To be a preparation 'gainst the Polack;
But, better look'd into, he truly found
It was against your Highness: whereat griev'd,
That so his sickness, age and impotence
Was falsely borne in hand, sends out arrests
On Fortinbras; which he, in brief, obeys,
Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine,
Makes vow before his uncle never more
To give th' assay of arms against your Majesty:
Whereon old Norway, overcome with joy,
Gives him three thousand crowns in annual fee,
And his commission to employ those soldiers,
So levied, as before, against the Polack:
With an entreaty, herein further shown, *Giving a paper*
That it might please you to give quiet pass
Through your dominions for this enterprise,
On such regards of safety and allowance
As therein are set down. (II, ii, 60–79)

In Act IV Scene iv Hamlet meets Fortinbras and his army on their way to the war against Poland:

- HAM. Good sir, whose powers are these?
- CAPTAIN. They are of Norway, sir.
- HAM. How purpos'd, sir, I pray you?
- CAPT. Against some part of Poland.
- HAM. Who commands them, sir?
- CAPT. The nephew to old Norway, Fortinbras.
- HAM. Goes it against the main of Poland, sir,
Or for some frontier?
- CAPT. Truly to speak, and with no addition,
We go to gain a little patch of ground
That hath in it no profit but the name.
To pay five ducats – five – I would not farm it;
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
- HAM. Why, then the Polack never will defend it.
- CAPT. Yes, it is already garrison'd.
- HAM. Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
Will not debate the question of this straw! (IV, iv, 9–26)

In the play's tragic finale Fortinbras enters, victorious from the Polack wars (V, ii, 381):

- HAM. What warlike noise is this?
- OSRIC. Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland,
To the ambassadors of England gives
This warlike volley. (V, ii, 354–357)

2. Extant Explanations

Strangely, most of the critics and historical interpreters seem to have ignored this background story.¹ But there have been a few exceptions, critics who may be classified in either of two schools of thought. The first is

¹ This article is an extended version of pp. 209–213 of my recently published book, *Goslicius' Ideal Senator and His Cultural Impact over the Centuries: Shakespearean Reflec-*

represented by John Dover Wilson and G.B. Harrison, who saw the Polish war episode as an allusion to the siege of Ostend from June 1601 to September 1604, in which Spanish forces under Ambrosio Spinola besieged and eventually took the strongest Anglo-Dutch garrison in the Netherlands (Wilson 305–306; Harrison 1951: 109–110; Miller 2007: 287–289; Jenkins 1982: 527–528; Pirie 1972: 293). This interpretation was challenged by E.K. Chambers (1944: 70–75) and others on grounds of chronology and “because of the inappropriateness of making the siege of Ostend an example of military futility, in view of its military and political importance” (Miller 2007: 288). The second group might be called the Symbolic Geography School (Cantor 1989: 98) and may be represented by Joan Landis, who asserts that “[a]s with other places in the Shakespearean terrain – Jerusalem, Turkey – Poland is symbolic geography of the richest sort” (8). She goes on to say that “Poland is, then, a specific geographical metaphor for a complex situation that is dramatized variously in the play” (10).

In the commentary to his edition of *Hamlet* Harold Jenkins is perplexed to observe that

the play seems to place Denmark between Norway and Poland. . . . The Elizabethan geography of those parts is often confused. . . . But it is not profitable to seek geographical precision for what Shakespeare is content to leave vague. The play is consistent within itself in making Fortinbras plan an invasion of Denmark (I, i, 98ff, I, ii, 17ff), switch his troops against Poland (II, ii, 64ff) proceed there by way of Denmark, and return by the same route. The shipbuilding of I, i, 78 acknowledges that a Norwegian invasion would be by sea, and if we think of Fortinbras now as having just disembarked, a meeting between him and Hamlet, who is about to put to sea (IV, iii, 55–8), is plausible enough. (527)

Jenkins' critical explication was devised before the ground-breaking work of Jerzy Limon on the origins and early history of English itinerant companies of actors on the continent of Europe, especially its northern parts. In *Gentlemen of a Company* and his other publications Limon demonstrates beyond all doubt that Shakespeare and his actor colleagues had a professional interest in Northern Europe; Elsinore (Helsingør) was one of the places where they performed and received lavish patronage (3, 8)

tions (see References). For the text of *Hamlet* I use Jenkins's Arden edition, and the reprint Variorum edition for the text of Q1.

and hence their knowledge of European geography could not have been as “confused” as Jenkins believed. Moreover, the actors were not the only Englishmen who had business on the Continent and therefore needed to be familiar with rather than “confused” not only about its geography but also its current events. Simple consultation of contemporary European history and looking further than just Ostend or the symbolic reaches of metaphor (but no further than within Shakespeare’s practical horizon) would have given Dover Wilson and Landis a surprising result – one that seems a far more comfortable fit than either of their suggestions.

3. A New Interpretation

The three references to Fortinbras’s Polish war appear to relate to a real war waged against Poland in 1600–1602, but not by Norway, which at the time was part of the dominions of the King of Denmark. Norway was Shakespeare’s necessary amendment for dramatic consistency and credibility (otherwise Fortinbras’ troops would not have needed to cross Danish territory). The other belligerent was Sweden, under the Duke of Södermanland (later Charles IX of Sweden), uncle of the heir to the Swedish throne, Sigismund III, King of Poland. The Duke’s invasion army was led by his illegitimate son, Carl Carlsson (later Field Marshal and Admiral) Gyllenhielm. The theatre of war was a zone staggered across the border of Polish Livonia and Swedish Estonia – an area of just 83,000 sq. km (Herbst 2006: 19), which compared to the vast territory of Poland–Lithuania: after 1569 and in the early 17th century oscillating around a figure of a million sq. km (depending on ongoing gains and losses), could indeed be called “a little patch of ground” without much exaggeration. Neither was it located in “the main of Poland,” but on the north-eastern periphery.

In the Middle Ages Livonia (the territory of modern Latvia and Estonia) had been the domain of the Order of the Livonian Knights. When Lutheranism reached the area during the Reformation the Order was secularised and, as its lands turned into a sparring-ground for rival powers endeavouring to gain control of this part of the Baltic coast, its last Grand Master enfeoffed it to the King of Poland, seeking the latter’s protection against the Grand Duke of Muscovy (“To pay five ducats – five – I would not *farm* it; / Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole / A ranker rate, should it be *sold in fee*”). A series of wars for the control of Livo-

nia ensued from the 1560s on and continued intermittently for a hundred years. The contenders for the control of the region were Sweden, Muscovy (Russia), and Poland–Lithuania. Eventually Sweden and Russia won the most gains. A consecutive instalment in the fighting came in 1600–1602 (Konopczyński 2003: 139).²

In the autumn of 1599, after Sigismund III, elective king of Poland, failed in his attempt to recoup his patrimony, the hereditary kingdom of Sweden, and subsequently incorporated his Estonian fiefdom into the Kingdom of Poland, the Swedish parliament voted to depose him, and his uncle Charles raised an army, sailing in the summer of the following year across the Baltic with a force of 22,000 men and landing near Reval (modern Tallinn: Herbst 2006: 40). A series of swift sieges was laid to Polish garrisons and castles over the autumn and winter months, and by early 1601 Swedish forces had captured most of the territory of Livonia. A period of enforced inactivity followed in the spring as the ice thawed and made the area impassable for large numbers of troops. But in June 1601 the tables turned: Polish reinforcements arrived and on 23 June (new style) routed the Swedes at Koknese, initiating a period of Polish successes and the recuperation of the losses of the previous winter. Although the Poles eventually forfeited most of their Livonian possessions to Sweden and Russia, their spell of good fortune continued until after 27 September 1605, when they won their most spectacular victory at the Battle of Kirchholm (Salaspils: Herbst 2006: 98–103).

English interests were at stake and many in London would have been observing developments closely. First of all there were the merchants trading with the north-eastern Baltic: Narva in Muscovy, and Riga, then a Polish port. In 1588 Henry Lane wrote in a letter to William Sanderson, describing the English trade with Riga:

And in anno 1560. [Anthony Jenkinson] with Henry Lane, came home into England: which yeere was the first safe returne, without losse or shipwracke, or dead freight, and burnings. And at this time was the first traffike to the Narue in Liuania, which confines with Lituania, and all the dominions of Russia: and the markets, faires, commodities, great townes and riuers, were sent vnto by dyuers seruants: the reports were taken by Henry Lane, Agent, and deliuered to the companie, 1561. The trade to Rie, and Reuel, of old time

² A Polish monograph of the 1600–1602 war, especially its military operations, was compiled by S. Herbst in 1938, with a second edition in 2006 containing a list of source materials and bibliography (236–249), German summary (250), and Russian summary (251–253).

hath bene long since frequented by our English nation, but this trade to the Narue was hitherto concealed from vs by the Danskers and Lubeckers.

(Hakluyt I: 500–502)

Not only were English “adventurers” trading with the north-east Baltic area, but they were also trying to chart a north-east passage for navigation to distant parts of the world – such as China. They were therefore interested in who would control the maritime traffic in the region. For them the impending war on the north-eastern Baltic coast for an “impostume” (an abscess or inward swelling full of corrupt matter: Jenkins 1982: 344, 528) “of much wealth and peace” was a serious threat to carefully planned investment. There were many in London who stood to lose should things turn out inauspiciously for the Merchant Adventurers and the Russia Company. Moreover, Poland had been the butt of widespread discontent since the summer of 1597, when a complaint delivered by Polish Ambassador Działyński at a public audience before Queen Elizabeth had elicited a vitriolic retort from her followed by the eruption of rioting (Baluk-Ulewiczowa 2009: 152–156, 183–191).

Another professional group with a vital interest were the itinerant actors, whose *Via Baltica* tours went not only to Elsinore, but all the way up to Königsberg, Lithuania, Latvia and even Riga (Limon 1985: 19, 21, 30–33; Żurowski 2007: 17–20). Thirdly, there were English, Scottish and Irish mercenaries serving in the armies of both sides (Herbst 2006: 18–19, 35, 47, 116, 154, 173, 178; Borowy 1949).

Religion was involved, too. Sigismund Vasa, the rightful monarch by the law of heredity, was a staunch Catholic, and the Swedish Lutherans feared he would re-Catholicise the country if restored to the throne. In 1599 the Duke of Södermanland sent an Englishman called Hill (perhaps the same man as the Captain James Hill who served on his Livonian campaign in 1600–1602 and was taken prisoner by the Poles? – Herbst 2006: 70, 148, 173, 178) on an embassy to Elizabeth. The embassy was recorded by Camden:

At the same time almost, Charles by Gods Grace hereditary Prince of the kingdomes of Sweden, Gothland, and Vandall (for this title hee used) sent unto the Queene one Hill an Englishman to cleere himselfe to the Queene of certaine calumniationes, as if he sought innovations by affecting the Crowne of Sweden against his Nephew Sigismond King of Poland, and prayed her not to give credite to detractors, and to assist him with her Counsaile and helpe

for the conservation and defence of the sincere Religion founded upon Gods word. Shee heard him publickly, answered him *ex tempore*, and wished him to keepe sincerely his fidelity to his Nephew, lest he sinned against Justice, Nature, and the rights of propinquity, and should seeme to observe duty more curiously than faithfully. (Camden 1599)

Elizabeth sat on the fence and vacillated, as she often did in such situations. Not that she did not want to defend “the sincere Religion founded upon Gods word”; rather she was watching and waiting for the outcome of the confrontation, especially as her ministers had patched up relations with Poland and were in the process of effecting peace with Spain. Also she would have had a genuine concern and sympathy for the legitimate ruler by the law of heredity and primogeniture, despite his Catholicism. Perhaps she saw any deviations from this principle as a threat to her own position. But her Protestant subjects might have admired the Swedish adventurer’s daring for a noble cause:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake. (IV, iv, 52–56)

4. The Date of Act IV Scene iv

Shakespeare had already employed a similar device in the prologue to Act V of *Henry V*, inserting a reference to a contemporary event – the imminent (presumably glorious) return of the Earl of Essex from Ireland – into a history play set in the early 15th century, thereby allowing critics to delimit the date of composition (of this passage at least in its first printed version) pretty accurately. If he decided on an analogous move here it would nicely provide us with sufficient indications to date at least these passages (especially Act IV Scene iv) in Q2 (the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*, 1604/1605) to the interval between Hill’s embassy in 1599 to the early months of 1601 and no later than by the June defeat of the Swedish force at Koknese.

Interestingly, there is only a six-line scrap of Act IV Scene iv in Q1, the much shorter, so-called “pirate” version of *Hamlet* printed not much more than a year ahead of Q2:

Enter Fortenbrasse, Drumme and Souldiers.
 Fort. Captaine, from vs goe greete
 The king of Denmarke:
 Tell him that Fortenbrasse nephew to old Norway,
 Craues a free passe and conduct ouer his land.
 According to the Articles agreed on:
 You know our Randevous, goe march away. *exeunt all.*
 (Q1, 1614–1619: *Hamlet* ed. Furness, II: 74)

We get none of the details about the paltriness of the expedition's aim (and the subsequent soliloquy is skipped as well); Q1 offers insufficient data to venture on a reliable historical interpretation. When "Fortenbrasse" appears with his train in the final sequence of Q1, we are not told he is coming "with conquest from Poland" and are left to guess whether he actually reached his destination or is still on his way there. Likewise in the 1623 Folio (F1): all we get are nine lines of Act IV Scene iv; on the other hand in the final scene of both Q2 and the Folio we hear of Fortinbras' conquest in Poland. The topicality of these Baltic events in the period from late 1599 to the middle of 1601 would account for their much more elaborate presentation in Q2, but patently more restrained and modest treatment both in Q1 and F1. And in *Der bestrafte Brudermord*, the preserved text of an early German version of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras does not appear on the stage at all; Hamlet is hailed by his uncle as King of Norway (Act I Scene vii – more in keeping with historical facts: Norway remained under the Danish crown until 1814); while in the final scene the dying Hamlet nominates his Norwegian cousin "Duke Fortempras" his successor and asks Horatio to take the crown to him in Norway. These mutilations corroborate the notion of the extended Scene iv of Act IV in Q2 as a seasonal, detachable topicality (Creizenach 1888: 186; *Hamlet* ed. Furness, II: 142).

The interpretation of Fortinbras's Polish war as a topical allusion to the 1599–mid-1601 episode of the Livonian conflict fits in snugly with the other references to Poland in the play, especially the change of the character's name from "Corambis" in Q1 to "Polonius" in Q2. Since the times of Israel Gollancz (1904: 199–202; 1916: 173–177) this issue has been seen as connected with the book *De Optimo Senatore* by the Pole Laurentius Grimalius Goslicius and its English translation, which was published under the title *The Counsellor* in 1598. Chambers (1923: II, 196; III, 298–299, 353–354, 453–455; IV, 321–323) gave a cogent argument based on documentary evidence for a link between the 1597 audience

of the Polish ambassador at Elizabeth's court and the suppression of *The Isle of Dogs* and closing of the theatres, which occurred within a matter of days after the incident with the ambassador. Following Chambers' line of thought I have supplemented his data with hitherto unexamined Polish materials, namely the manuscript of Ambassador Działyński's report on the legation and other documents relating to diplomatic relations between Poland and Elizabeth's ministers in 1597–1598, and have come up with strong evidence corroborating Gollancz's and Chambers' surmise (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa 2009: 183–188). Elsewhere in the book (189–209) I scrutinise the literary evidence for the claim that *The Counsellor* was a Shakespearean source for the character of Polonius, having earlier (168–183) reviewed this hypothesis, put forward by previous authors on the grounds of Polonius's Precepts alone, and found it unconvincing, since the Precepts are nothing more than a compilation of standard Renaissance commonplaces. However, an in-depth confrontation of certain other passages in *Hamlet*, particularly the Q2 text – lines which cannot be reduced to commonplaces – with excerpts from *The Counsellor*, parts of which leave much to be desired as regards quality of translation, led me to an interesting set of conclusions verifying the link, but re-orienting it in a new way that goes beyond the rather shallow claim based on the Precepts alone. It seems that not only Shakespeare but also his audiences saw Polonius in the context of the Polish embassy of 1597, the *Isle of Dogs* affair, and the anti-Polish ingredient in the general air of public discontent prevailing at the time when the political conflict between the Cecils and Essex was intensifying to its tragic climax in February 1601. Against the background of the long remembered, publicly witnessed Polish embassy of 1597 and its concurrence with the closing down of the theatres, the ambivalent name of the Corambis/Polonius character, and *The Counsellor* published "To the honour of the Polonian Empyre" (the motto on its title page) – it seems quite natural that many of Shakespeare's theatregoers could have associated Fortinbras' Polish war with the Baltic campaign that was being embarked on against a "little patch" of the country's vast expanses. Those whose interests could have been jeopardised by an unfavourable outcome (real or imagined) of that war would have been all the more inclined to associate *Hamlet* IV, iv with their own affairs. This is not to say that *no-one* in Shakespeare's audiences could have had reminiscences of the siege of Ostend on hearing the lines of IV, iv delivered from the stage. But the probability is that they would have been far outnum-

bered by those who received the scene in the straightforward way and were aware of what was going on in the north-eastern part of the Baltic. The respective dates offer a curious detail in corroboration. Whereas any reference, deliberate or unintentional, to the siege of Ostend, could only have been treated (or expected) as a viable audience response *after* late June 1601, in the case of an allusion to the Livonian war the time-period of its validity and topicality would have been *from* Hill's audience with Elizabeth in the latter half of 1599, *until and no later than the end of June 1601* (June 23 being the date of the first Polish victory), and *certainly not in the period between late June, 1601, and September 27, 1605*, when fortune in arms was on the Polish side. The time-periods for the respective stage-worthiness of the two proposals of a topical identification are adjacent to each other but do not overlap. In the case of a Polish interpretation there would have been no point in maintaining IV, iv in its full extent after late June 1601 (and it is registered in full *only* in Q2, with lines 9–66 omitted in the 1623 Folio – Jenkins 344), therefore if this was the intended sense we might expect the full scene to have been played within the limits of the autumn season of 1599 until the spring of 1601.

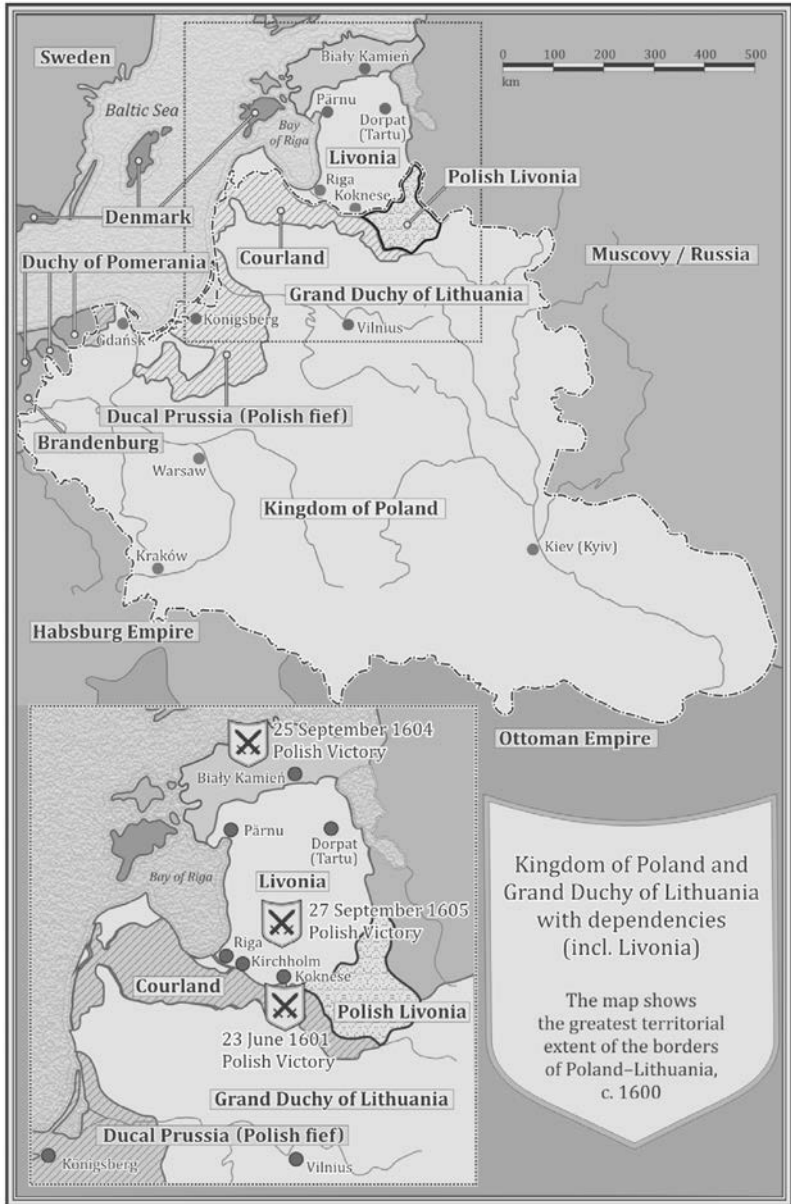
5. Concluding Remarks

There is one further conclusion to be inferred from the proposed dating for Act IV Scene iv. If my diagnosis regarding time of creation is correct, it would provide yet one more piece of evidence in favour of a revision theory. Q2 might then be considered a compendium of elements of the play which were put on the stage on various occasions but could not be published in the just slightly anterior Q1, for reasons such as censorship, and more particularly self-censorship exercised by the company of actors itself to preserve a successful play for development in better times (on the accession of a monarch more gracious to players than the aged and paranoid Gloriana). In fact the bringing out of the bowdlerised rump Q1 by the company in anticipation of an upcoming opportunity to take the extended version and the best of its incidental, ad-hoc accretions out of the on-stage, transient orality of performance and to perpetuate it in print could have been (and in the light of Q2 – was) a successful way of outwitting the censors and their army of snoopers – not as yet equipped with reliable recording devices other than their memories.

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